



Global Cooperation Instead of Confrontation

By Peter Lunenborg and Fernando Rosales¹

The unprecedented health and socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 have led to numerous statements, solemn declarations and pledges of international cooperation and solidarity. But the world witnesses a weakening of the multilateral system, actions aimed at debilitating or blocking the functioning of international organizations and the contempt of international rules based on the exercise of political and economic power. One manifestation of this is the so-called ‘trade war’ launched by the United States of America against China.

During the last few decades, many Western companies did good business in China, enabled among others by China’s commitments made in the process towards accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO), the implementation of its WTO accession commitments as well as additional bilateral commitments such as those agreed between the US and China. It was thought that market liberalization would make China’s style of governance more ‘Western’ as well.

More recently, the US view of China seemed to have turned darker and more antagonistic. The Trump administration made China a nemesis of the United States which brought with it an interest in confrontation rather than cooperation. Many people are hoping that a change of administration might change the confrontational policy of Trump against China. Would this be the case? Two recent reports published in November 2020 seem to indicate that mainstream thinking and policymaking within the US with respect to China might follow the current trend.

First, the US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations published a report “The United States and Europe: A Concrete Agenda for Transatlantic Cooperation on China”. It reiterates the US fears on China and proposes the establishment of a coalition with Europe and other allies to “confront China’s attempts to undermine the rule of law”². The report states that China poses significant political, economic and security challenges and proposes a transatlantic agenda to defend the US and Europe’s interests and values. To advance this agenda it puts forward ideas for collaboration in six key areas: fending off malign political influence, protecting the

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² The United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, “The United States and Europe: A Concrete Agenda for Transatlantic Cooperation on China”, Majority Report, November 2020. Available from [https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/SFRC%20Majority%20China-Europe%20Report%20FINAL%20\(P&G\).pdf](https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/SFRC%20Majority%20China-Europe%20Report%20FINAL%20(P&G).pdf).

integrity of international organizations, addressing anti-competitive trade and economic practices, investing in future technologies and shaping how they are used, confronting the security implications of China's strategic investments in energy, transport, and digital infrastructure through "One Belt, One Road" (OBOR), and invigorating partnerships in Africa and the Indo-Pacific.

In terms of trade the report proposes to work with a group of like-minded countries towards the revocation of China's developing country status at WTO and take measures to control exports related to certain technologies perceived for military end users in China. The report also considers these allies working together to diversify some key supply chains away from China. According to them the transatlantic community should work together to agree upon the sectors most disadvantaged and endangered by over-concentration in China that have been affected by the COVID-19 disruption.³

Second, the Secretary of State issued another report called "The Elements of the China Challenge" which echoed similar arguments and recommendations. This report considers China a challenge to freedom and international order, because China looks for revising the "...world order, placing the People's Republic of China (PRC) at the center and serving Beijing's authoritarian goals and hegemonic ambitions."⁴ It considers that China poses a mounting challenge to free and sovereign nation-states and to the free, open, and rules-based international order. It supports this argument by referring to "CCP's contempt for human life, indifference to other nations' well-being" and "recklessness in allowing the novel coronavirus born in Wuhan to develop into a global pandemic."

Among the recommendations, it considers that the US "must strengthen its alliance... by forming a variety of groupings and coalitions to address specific threats to freedom". It also suggests that the US should, where necessary, build new international organizations with allies.

Both reports are imbalanced, show ideological biases and are more akin to an anti-China crusade... A Western academic has noted that "we should bear in mind, without losing sight in negative aspects of international politics of any country, China is not the Soviet Union, they are not trying to build a socialist international order. China also does not pretend to export its political system as some other hegemonic countries do, in particular to developing countries which do not share its vision of the world".⁵

China's progress has been attained in legitimate ways, playing within the rules set by the international community, including Western countries. The referred to reports question the

³ Ibid.

⁴ Office of the Secretary of State, "The Elements of the China Challenge" (November 2020). Available from , <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/20-02832-Elements-of-China-Challenge-508.pdf>.

⁵ Oriana Skylar Mastro from Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies at Stanford University. Quoted by David Wertime in "Time for the West to revisit its China narratives" published in POLITICO's China Watcher (19/11/2020).

right of China to pursue foreign policies which are commonplace for Western powers. For instance, China's investments and acquisitions in Africa are disapproved of, but no assessment is made whether such investments and actions have brought improvements of Africa's infrastructure or wellbeing.

The sentiment to 'take on' China with a group of allies have historic parallels with China's 'century of humiliation' starting around mid-19th century when countries such as the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia and the United States tried to contain and subjugate China. Henry Kissinger, former US Secretary of State who was one of the architects of US-China opening in the 1970s which ushered in a period of growth and prosperity, has also warned the US of going down this road. He urges caution when asked about the idea of building a coalition of democracies to take on Beijing. "I think democracies should cooperate wherever their convictions allow it or dictate it," he added. "I think a coalition aimed at a particular country is unwise, but a coalition to prevent dangers is necessary where the occasion requires."⁶

The world faces many challenges besides the current coronavirus pandemic, including hunger, environmental destruction, climate change, the proliferation of nuclear weapons and rising inequality. Global cooperation is necessary to address these challenges and, in some areas, the global community is responding to them. An example of such a coalition is the COVAX Facility, albeit not perfect, a tool to improve access to COVID-19 vaccines. Implementing the Paris Agreement under the auspices of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change is a first step to address climate change.

Calls to form a coalition against a particular country divert attention from the problems the world is facing and hamper progress in addressing these global challenges. History taught us that the best way to resolve our differences and to move forward is through dialogue and cooperation, not confrontation.

⁶ Quoted by Peter Martin. "Kissinger Warns Biden of U.S.-China Catastrophe on Scale of WWI", Bloomberg, November 16, 2020.